

## **Alastair's Opening Remarks for Joseph Mairs Memorial 2011**

When we compare the labour climate that young Joseph worked and struggled in and the world of today, the social advances made are obvious.

The rights to join a union and to bargain collectively are confirmed by the Supreme court as part of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. A myriad of workplace regulation exists covering health and safety and pay. Health care and pensions are part of the landscape. These changes taken together have totally transformed the lives of workers in Canada.

But the economic structure would be familiar to Joseph. Oversized corporations still control the lifeblood of the economy. Decisions made in New York City or London open and close factories on the opposite side of the world. The monopolies are more faceless now. The complexities of modern industry cannot be mastered by a single individual. Teams of experts make decisions which lift up workers into prosperity or, more likely, throw them down into poverty.

In the early days of the Dominion of Canada, the labour leaders tried to ally with the leading politicians. John A Macdonald legalised 'registered' unions. But as no unions could register, the promise proved false. This did not stop MacDonal from calling himself the 'Working man's' Friend' for the next two decades.

As Labour Councils formed in the larger centres, attempts were made to link them into larger bodies which stretched across provincial boundaries. Political Action Committees pushed for legislation already enacted in the UK and US, such as child labour laws. A few people of lower class origins were elected as independent candidates or for the Liberal Party but they were soon corrupted. After leaving office, they were rewarded with government positions.

But when Labour Council fielded candidates who spoke to the issues and needs of workers, a funny thing happened. The major parties noticed the support and votes received by the independent candidates for certain platform planks, like the 8 hour day, and would add them to their own programmes in the next election. The Liberal Party had universal healthcare in its program since 1919!

In this way, reforms and improvements were made. Though far from complete, these reforms have improved the lives of people. Most dramatic was the skill shown by Tommy Douglas in getting the Liberal party to finally enact their decades old promise of healthcare. Using the New Democratic Party's balance of power, he forced the Liberals to make it happen.

Since the 1980s, concerted efforts have been made by those representing the top 5% of the population to strip away all the victories won. First a programme is underfunded, then the public is turned against it and the programs are cut. Mouthpieces of the super-rich, like the Fraser Institute, pour poison on public programs every day. Public Education is their big target, the same Public Education which transformed Canada over the last century. Teachers and their Unions are subject to slander and innuendo. Private schools are lauded and faith in public schools is undermined.

The twin challenges we face today are preserving what we have won and advancing worker rights to achieve a modern Public Democracy. Canada is still a civil society and much can be achieved without literally going to war. Only if the rollback of social progress succeeds, will we be forced to man the barricades again.